

Tableau

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Returning to earth

'Can we, as artists, compete with nature?' A question posed by the American artist Dan Asher that aligns well with the urgency of the new exhibition 'EARTH – A collective landscape,' currently on display at AkzoNobel on the Amsterdam Zuidas. Text: Floris Kappelle

Hester Alberdingk Thijm of the AkzoNobel Art Foundation poses the question of whether artists can compete with nature to visitors of the new exhibition. She guides us through the works of more than forty artists exploring topics such as ecological awareness and the changing landscape. It turns out to be an invitation to delve deeper into the role of humans in nature. As the climate crisis manifests itself with intensity, the question arises whether humans should return to the planet more quickly, firmly grounded. 'We leave the answer to that question to the viewer's imagination.'

Magical form of expression

Alberdingk Thijm sees the exhibition as an ecosystem, a collective landscape in which the works complement and deepen each other. We encounter works from the 90s, recent pieces created specifically for 'EARTH,' and everything in between, ranging from photography to video installations, paintings to sculptures.

The guided tour seems to be a metaphor for a stroll along a forest path through various landscapes. From the dark woods of Pär Strömberg to a shimmering composition of color by Monika Michalko. 'EARTH' invites contemplation about nature and how we fit into it. According to Alberdingk Thijm, a theme must grow. Thus, 'EARTH' emerged almost naturally after previous exhibitions delving into the human image.



Hester Alberdingk Thijm with the work of Mirte van Laarhoven, Bob Bonies, Hadassa Emmerich at AkzoNobel Art Foundation (photo Friso Keurs)

'This theme is more relevant than ever. It seems like natural disasters are happening more frequently. That's why we focus on a re-experience of nature, the need for greenery and its proximity. We juxtapose that against major themes like nitrogen, climate, and global warming. Global issues on one hand, but something very personal on the other – a growing desire to go outside and recharge. In our Art Space, you see how art and nature are two completely intertwined sources of energy. With nature as inspiration and a visual language so magical, overwhelming, and inexhaustible that you sometimes think nature triumphs art.'

Greater ecological awareness

In 'EARTH,' humans play a minimal role. They have been downgraded to almost invisible spectators, detached from their natural surroundings. This creates a sense of alienation. Alberdingk Thijm sees the exhibition as a cry for attention because humans have gone too far: 'An indictment and simultaneously a call to action. We invite the viewer to become part of this collective landscape and dissolve into a world that is infinitely larger than ourselves. We have built bridges and flown to the moon, but we must realize that the planet lies at our feet. We need to cultivate and preserve it. Not so long ago, the city was much greener. Now, everything is concrete and neatly arranged. The balance with nature must be restored. *Down to earth*, that is our message. But whether this art and these artists provide solutions: no. We are not dogmatic, but we hope for a wake-up call that leads to greater ecological awareness. If that happens, our story has succeeded.'

Container of memories

'Collecting art is like a forest. You continuously add something new within a sustainable system. The goal is not the whims of the day but controlled growth while taking good care of it, hopefully for eternity. Without any commercial interest.' 'EARTH' showcases works from various disciplines that strengthen each other as a whole." Alberdingk Thijm: 'We observe the towering forest giants we acquired in the early days, showcasing them alongside the work of young sprouts. Like the monochromatic color fields of Bob Bonies next to the ritualistic actions of Agnes Waruguru. They prompt reflection on space and infinity, both within the confines of the canvas and within the space to which the works beckon us. Or, as Waruguru describes it, each work is, like a landscape, a container of memories. Purely natural materials have been used, such as ceramics by Jonat Deelstra and wooden reliefs by Alejandra Venegas, but also entirely artificial elements like Chan Chiao Chun's polyester mushroom and Jan Robert Leegte's video installation, which makes the disastrous consequences of a changing climate palpable. Our company has been looking for decades at the most sustainable materials that are not



burdensome to the environment. We are leaders in ESG indices and other sustainability indexes; with a AAA position in MSCI, ESG top-rated by Sustainalytics, and in the top 1% of all rated companies by EcoVadis. The 'EARTH' exhibition aligns perfectly with our corporate goals.'

Shock effect

The human presence is elusive in this exhibition, with one exception: the hypnotic video animation by Jacco Olivier in which a figure tumbles between heaven and earth. Alberdingk Thijm: 'We are also there. This is an extraordinarily symbolic image in the spectrum of stories that give rise to new connections and hopefully lead to the realization that we all must do something to bring the earth back into our collective memory and return to our natural environment. Beautiful pictures alone won't get us there, which is why we want to wake up the public and call for action. There must be a shock effect. Climate issues vary everywhere. Too wet, too dry, too cold, too hot. And it often gets worse.'



Solastalgia

Displaying works that the Art Foundation has had for a while alongside recent pieces in a space proves that art collections can be genuinely growing organisms. Conservative and innovative at the same time.

Alberdingk Thijm: 'We never discard anything. My favorites? The painting *Zora* by Robert Zandvliet, where we look up from the grass and flowers to a scorching sunrise in a color scheme that shimmers like a mirage. Michelle Piergoelam's work is also exceptional. She takes us to a dream world where high water from a river predicts doom. That theme also plays a role in the work of Kyra Sacks, who introduces the term 'Solastalgia' with her quintessentially Dutch dike landscape. A nostalgic feeling wells up each time when you realize that landscapes are inevitably subject to change. There lies the beauty, but also the warning.'



Images credits: 1. Par Strömberg, *MIS KERZU*, 2005, oil paint on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, 2. Jacco Olivier, *Perpetuum*, 2022, video animation, 3 min 15 sec. 3. Robert Zandvliet, *Zora*, 2023, egg tempera on linen, 270 x 450 cm, courtesy Galerie Onrust, Amsterdam.